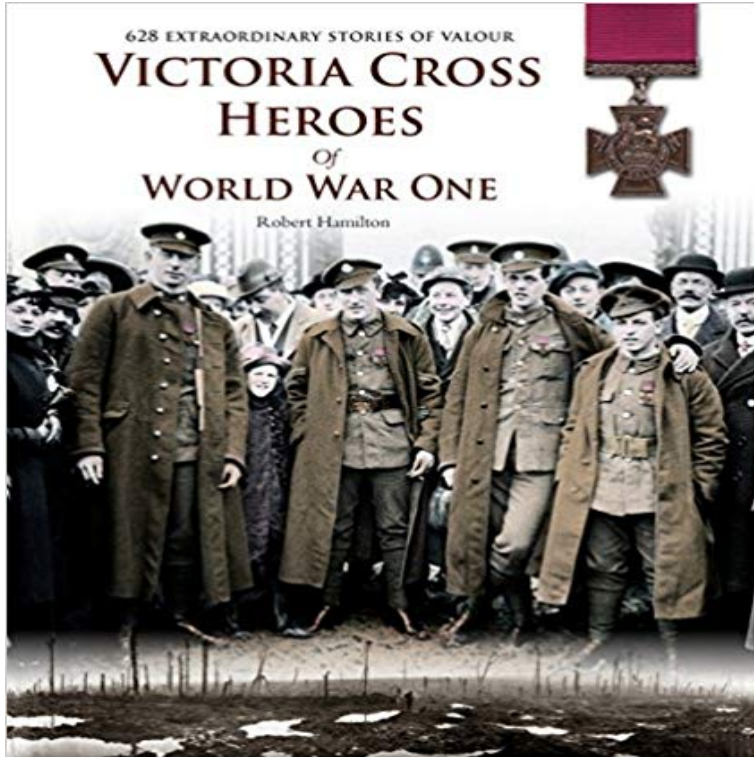


Victoria Cross Heroes of World War One: 628 Extraordinary Stories of Valour



The Victoria Cross had been in existence over 60 years when Archduke Franz Ferdinand fell to an assassin's bullet, the event that triggered a Europe-wide call to arms in August 1914. It was an award that democratised military honours, for it was open to all ranks, the sole qualification being a display of conspicuous bravery in the field. The sovereign whose name it bore was personally responsible for the Cross's simple legend: For Valour. Forged, it is said, from cannons captured during the Crimean War, the medals were rather too plain for some tastes. The Times derided the VC as a dull, heavy, tasteless prize when the first investiture ceremony took place in Hyde Park on 26 June 1857. But its virtue, quite deliberately, lay in its very simplicity. It was the action for which the medal was given that should dazzle, not the decoration itself. The Victoria Cross became pre-eminent: first in line when pinned to a uniform or appended to a recipient's name. Over 500 VCs had been awarded by the outbreak of the First World War. That figure more than doubled during the four-year-long conflict. Trench warfare, when the rival camps might be dug in less than 100 yards apart, afforded endless opportunities to show courage and mettle in the face of the enemy. Many were honoured for attacking feats, often taking the fight to the foe when the odds were stacked against survival. But hurling oneself into the fray was but one of valour's many faces. Stretcher-bearers, medical staff, pipers and chaplains also showed the same strength in adversity, the same disregard for personal safety, the same willingness to exceed the call of duty. And, in over 180 instances, a readiness to make the ultimate sacrifice for King and Country. The call to act could come at any moment. In William McFadzean's case it came when the safety pins slipped from two grenades in a crowded trench just before the Somme battle. He flung himself

onto the bombs, saving his comrades at the cost of his own life. For Rex Warneford it came in the skies over Ghent on 7 June 1915, when he became the first man to down a German airship in flight. He was thrown from his plane during a flight ten days later. For Jack Cornwell it came during the Battle of Jutland, when, mortally wounded, he stuck doggedly to his post awaiting orders. He was 16 years old. This book chronicles the inspiring, thrilling, humbling and deeply moving stories behind the 628 Victoria Crosses awarded during the course of the Great War. Without inscription, those 628 medals, like all the others cast by London jewelers, Hancocks over the past century and a half, would have no intrinsic worth. Once earned, inscribed and conferred, they assume inestimable value.

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